

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 20, 2020

Ms. Rebecca J. Stackhouse
Director
Salem VA Medical Center
1970 Roanoke Boulevard
Salem, VA 24153

Dear Director Stackhouse:

We are writing to request more information on your efforts at the Salem VA Medical Center to address the spread of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the veterans population you serve in the Commonwealth of Virginia while ensuring the health and safety of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees.

Many of Virginia's veterans are particularly susceptible to COVID-19 due to age and underlying health conditions. As the Commonwealth of Virginia and the federal government respond to the spread of COVID-19 in the United States and around the world, we urge the VA to expend every effort to ensure that veterans will be appropriately cared for during the outbreak of this deadly disease, and to seek further assistance when required.

As the VA works to care for our nation's veterans with COVID-19 and to reduce the spread of this disease, the VA must also prioritize the protection of its employees – the health care providers, administrators, support staff, and others – who are on the frontlines in the battle against COVID-19, and who risk daily exposure to the virus. The VA must make every effort to provide these employees with appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and training to safely support veteran patients. We urge you, when possible, to allow for individuals, such as administrators, to telework.

We are interested in what the Salem VA Medical Center is doing to implement the VA's strategy to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. We ask that you respond to the following questions as soon as possible either by contacting our offices directly or through written responses:

1. Accurate and widespread testing of individuals for COVID-19 is seen as a key component to understanding and limiting the spread of the disease. Does your Medical Center currently have the ability to test patients and staff for COVID-19, and if not, when will your facility have access to these tests?
 - a. If your facility is currently testing veterans, how quickly can a veteran with a suspected case of COVID-19 be tested for the disease?
 - b. How many COVID-19 tests have you conducted, and how many patients have tested positive?
 - c. Should a patient or staff member test positive for COVID-19, what procedures are in place for informing, isolating, and treating this individual?

- d. How many COVID-19 tests do you currently have available and ready at your facility?
 - e. Will your facility establish drive-through testing facilities for veterans?
2. VA employees, especially those who are health care providers, play a central role in limiting the spread of COVID-19. What steps are you taking to train and protect your Medical Center staff?
 - a. Please describe the steps taken to ensure that VA employees have access to any PPE they may need, including N95 masks.
 - b. Please describe the steps taken to ensure that VA employees receive training on the proper use of PPE.
 - c. Please describe the steps taken to investigate and notify all individuals who come in contact with either patients or employees who test positive for COVID-19.
 - d. Do your staff members have enough PPE, including N95 masks, gloves, and gowns to protect against the spread of respiratory pathogens?
 - e. Are employees not trained as health care providers required to assist in the screening of patients for COVID-19, or required to perform any medical role for which they have not been properly trained?
 - f. Have VA employees and the groups that represent them been involved in meetings to implement contingency plans and protocols in response to COVID-19?
3. Social distancing is crucial to reducing the transmission of COVID-19 to those most at risk of serious complications from the disease. Has your Medical Center permitted VA employees to telework when possible?
 - a. Please describe the steps that a VA employee at your facility must take to receive permission to telework.
 - b. How many VA employees are currently teleworking, and do you anticipate that additional employees will work from home in the immediate future?
 - c. What actions have you taken to ensure that the maximum number of employees can telework if necessary over the coming months?
4. Do you believe your facility can meet the growing demands from veterans for care during this crisis? How do you intend to handle a surge in patients and how will telehealth fit into this larger strategy?
5. The VA is required by statute to treat non-veteran patients during national emergencies. Historically, the VA has embraced this mission, assisting Americans throughout the country during hurricanes, mass shootings, and other natural tragedies. What steps have you taken to ensure that your facility can handle a surge of non-veteran patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19?
 - a. Before the COVID-19 outbreak began last year, when was the last occasion your facility trained its staff on pandemic protocols and procedures?

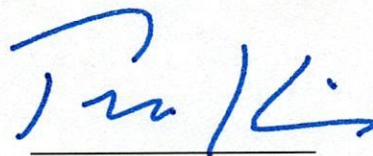
Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to hearing back from you about your strategies to treat veterans and protect VA employees during this pandemic. Please let us

know how we can be helpful to ensure that our veterans and the VA employees who serve them will persevere during this difficult time.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator

